

The Fourth Church Pulpit

A TIME TO DANCE

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(Services held in the Four Seasons Hotel)

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH



A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Jeremiah 33:10-11, 14-16, Luke 21:25-36

"You have turned my mourning into dancing." Psalm 30:11a

I have, over the years, worshiped in church basements, garages, dining rooms and gymnasiums. I have led worship and preached out-of-doors, on the church lawn once in the sixties when that sort of thing used to qualify as "contemporary worship," and I have done my requisite duty on numerous vesper hills, fighting mosquitoes, beside ponds, on the shores of several lakes and one ocean and, for one sequence of eight dreadful years, at Cub Scout camp around the flag pole at dawn surrounded by 100 shivering, tired, unhappy nine-year-olds who hadn't slept a wink all night — perhaps the ultimate homiletic challenge ... I have conducted worship in the woods, interrupted by a stray dog walking in, looking around, making three circles and falling asleep in front of the pulpit. But I have never before worshiped or preached in a grand ballroom, of the Four Seasons Hotel, no less.

I want to say "thank you" to each and every one who helped create this unusual event. We are here, you know, to give the contractors full access to our sanctuary in the final stages of restoration. Early in the process we decided to continue worshiping in the sanctuary as work progressed. That decision made life more difficult for the workers who had to turn the space over to us each week on Saturday and for our house staff who cleaned, dusted and set-up and arranged almost 1,000 folding chairs so that we could worship on Sunday. So to them, workers and house staff, the first words of thanks.

We did agree to vacate the building for two weeks at the end of the process to give the contractor and workers uninterrupted access to complete the task prior to our moving back in on December 4. According to our resident historian, Micah Marty, in that decision we are making a little history. This is the first time since 1874, when the congregation moved into its new church built after the great Chicago Fire, that the congregation of Fourth Presbyterian Church has worshiped anywhere but in its own sanctuary. Immediately after the fire, the congregation worshiped in the homes of members, the Standard Club, and for a while in the McVickers Theater. So this is an historic occasion.

"Thank you" to the hotel and its staff for accommodating us. This event is as unusual for them as it is for us. And to our team, staff and volunteers — musicians, clergy, ushers — and to all of you for being good sports and indulging us during the inconvenience of the project. Thank you.

We know, of course, that the church is the people and not the building and that worship does not have to happen in church buildings: that all space is sacred and God is present everywhere and accessible everywhere. Nevertheless, we are accustomed to our beloved sanctuary. We know the feel of the pews, the sound of the organ, the atmosphere, the smell of the place. "How to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land," the Psalmist asked when God's people were in Babylon. Their problem was a little more serious than ours. They were in forced exile, Babylonian captivity in a hostile culture. They weren't going home for a generation. Our exile is only one week.

But the question is a good one. How to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Or, "what to preach in the Grand Ballroom of the Four Seasons Hotel on the first Sunday of Advent"?

A good friend of mine, Barbara Wheeler, President of Auburn Theological Seminary, and a good friend of Fourth Presbyterian Church, was in worship last Sunday. After the service she was inspecting the work in progress, admiring the new ceiling, and the new lively acoustics. Barbara is bright and inventive, so I said, "We're worshiping in the ballroom of the Four Seasons next week. What do you think I should preach?" "You're worshiping in a ballroom?" she asked. "Yes," I said, feeling like she was going to lecture me for my lack of integrity or taste or something. "A ballroom. That's easy," she said, "Preach on David dancing before the Lord."

So — A Time to Dance. It's in the third chapter of Ecclesiastes in that wonderful passage about timeliness: "a time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance."

Actually, there's a lot of dancing in the Bible. The Psalter this morning —

"You have turned my mourning into dancing.
You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy."

When the people are miraculously delivered at the Red Sea, Aaron's sister Miriam leads the women of Israel in a joyful dance. After David slays Goliath there is dancing in the streets of all the towns of Judah. Later when David enters Jerusalem with the Ark of the Covenant, he, David, dances before the Lord with all his might, dances with such enthusiasm that his wife, Michal, is offended and accuses him of not acting with royal modesty and dignity.

There's enough dancing in the Old Testament to assure us that our own tradition knows about the expression of profound religious feelings through bodily movement. People dance when their joy is bigger than the words they ordinarily use to express it. The scholars tell us that there was a slow, limping kind of dance for the Passover. Pavane for a Dead Princess, by Maurice Ravel is, I think, one of the loveliest pieces of music ever written: A Pavane is a dance. And if you experience ballet, you know how magnificently dancing is able to capture, convey and celebrate human experience — as no other form of communication. When Juliet cradles Romeo in her arms and tries desperately to place his lifeless arms around her neck — it is so exquisitely beautiful and sad, you know there are no words for it. Someone once asked the famous Russian ballerina, Pavlova, what a certain dance she had performed meant. Her response has become a classic. She said, "If I could tell you, I wouldn't have to dance."

There is dancing in the Bible because there is joy in the Bible — more profound than any words to express it.

It is not superficial joy. It is not even the normal happiness people experience when things are going well, the joy of love and laughter and health. In fact, much of the Bible was written and much of the joy is experienced precisely when the immediate situation seems to be without any hope at all.

The Jeremiah passage we heard this morning was written when things could not have looked more dismal for God's people. The armies of Babylon are at the gates of Jerusalem and the prophet chooses that very moment to announce that the days are coming when God will fulfill the promises made to Israel.

And the passage from the Gospel according to Luke, assigned for the first Sunday of Advent, is also an affirmation of great hope and joy in the midst of adversity. At first hearing it sounds like a prediction of the terrible end of the world. But if you read it carefully and understand it — understand it as a cry of defiant hope, heard and preserved by Christians near the end of the First Century — it becomes a word of deep and profound joy. Those people didn't know if they'd live out another day; didn't know whether they'd have their children taken from them, their houses burned down and themselves tortured or thrown to the lions. Of course, they loved apocalyptic thinking — the kind of thinking that predicted the end of the current situation and the ultimate putting right of all that was wrong.

But even in that situation there is dancing instead of mourning. Did you hear it? You have to listen carefully for the promise and the joy ... It's there in the middle of the passage: "Hold your head high. Your redemption is drawing near."

We often miss it. When we hear these apocalyptic passages on the first Sundays in Advent, it seems like the church gets the Birth of Jesus and the Second Coming all mixed up, and that the Second Coming is not a particularly pleasant occasion. The problem is that apocalyptic writing and thinking have been appropriated by modern-day zealots who have some stake in predicting the imminent end of the world. In fact, it has been going on for 2,000 years. Someone has always been quoting the Bible, grossly misunderstanding the words, predicting the end with considerable precision — often with tragic consequences.

The popularized versions of it are pretty dismal. Lewis Smedes remembers teaching a class on the Christian doctrine of eternal life. "How many of you want to go to heaven?" he asked. Every hand went up. "How many want to go today?" No one volunteered. I read somewhere about a little boy who was told that Jesus was coming and the end was near and he prayed that Jesus might hold off just a while longer to give the Detroit Tigers a chance to be in a World Series.

Madeleine L'Engle recalls someone suggesting that

"Jesus will come again on a mushroom cloud, that the sign of the Second Coming will be the roiling cloud of an exploded nuclear bomb. 'No!'" she wrote. "Everything in me rejects the conjunction of an act of destruction with God's act of creative love." [*A Stone For a Pillow*, p. 117]

We believe that our judge is our creator, our heavenly parent who loves us. We believe that in God's judgment there is no harshness, no bitterness — to use John Calvin's lovely phrase. We believe that God's holding us accountable and ultimately judging us is redemption, carried out with the patience and grace of a loving mother or father.

I know now that the best moments of my childhood happened when I brought my failures, my mistakes, to my parents and discovered acceptance, understanding, compassion, forgiveness, encouragement, not condemnation and judgment.

If parenthood is the best metaphor we have for God, then you and I know what redemptive judgment means; know what loving judgment means. And so I think we know intuitively that whatever end the Creator has in mind for the world, and for us, personally, it is a fulfillment of love and not an occasion of fearful punishment.

St. Paul struggled with words to express it. "The whole creation waits with eager longing," he wrote, not fear and trembling. I love the way Madeleine L'Engle put it. In the end,

"all will be redeemed, not just the small portion of the population who have been given the grace to know it and to accept Christ ... all the strayed and stolen sheep. All the lost little ones."
[p. 117, *Ibid*]

That's the reason for the dancing.

Advent begins quietly for the Christian church, quietly and in darkness because the darkness is where much of history happens and where we live much of the time. The Christian church resists the temptation to leap ahead to the birth of Jesus but instead spends time reflecting on what it means to live in darkness, precisely so the joy and dancing of Christmas will be more complete, more authentic, more transforming.

We sang one of our most glorious carols instead of a traditional Advent hymn this morning. My first hearing of "O Come, All Ye Faithful" this year was last Saturday night, at the Michigan Avenue Lighting Celebration. The floats this year were wonderful. The first one was an enormous Mickey Mouse several stories high, spewing out colorful confetti, bright lights; a life-size Mickey greeting people in the crowd and behind it all, blaring, an up-tempo version of "Adeste Fideles." Advent can be like that on Michigan Avenue. And so I thought maybe singing it here might be a kind of Advent reclamation operation.

But here, in the church, even when the church is in a ballroom, we begin our celebration of the coming of the light by taking the darkness seriously.

Of all the sadness and tragedy in the news recently, one incident has affected us more deeply than most: stunned us into silence. We hesitate even to speak of the six Willis children, killed when their family's van caught fire and exploded. We hesitate because the darkness is so deep and they were so innocent, and their parents, although perhaps not saying it the way we would write the script, are being so strong and holding onto each other and to their faith which is such an anomaly, such a peculiar phenomena that the media is mesmerized.

And then, last week, I saw a televised attempt to interpret it, and a somber TV commentator said something like: "People of faith believe that when things like this tragedy happen it is God's will. People of faith believe that there is a script for everything and that their faith requires them to accept whatever happens as God's will." On and on he went, suggesting that it was God who willed or caused the accident: God responsible for the pain of the parents ... and I wanted to shout, "No! You don't get it at all!"

It's all right for parents who lose children to be angry, to rage at injustice: it is just fine to come to God with a broken heart and ask why. It is okay when we must sit in a land of deep darkness to wonder out loud whether this is right and necessary and in any way connected to the will of a compassionate and loving God.

What Advent means is that even in this deep darkness God is lovingly and redemptively present. Even in this world-ending catastrophe for six precious children, God is somehow miraculously and redemptively present.

Somehow those six children are safe. And somehow, their parents will be held in the everlasting arms. That's what Advent means: not just glittering lights and Mickey Mouse and bright colored confetti, but love strong enough to go into the valley of the shadow of death for us. Light strong enough to shine in the darkness. "You have turned my mourning into dancing."

Professor Fred Craddock warns against the "subjective captivity of the Gospel." By that he means that Christians believe that there is something universal and cosmic going on in Jesus Christ. The Coming of Christ is for our salvation but it is also for something infinitely larger than our personal salvation: something so big we hardly have words for it: something like the summation of all history, the completion of God's loving plan for the whole creation. We Christians believe that in Jesus Christ God keeps coming into history with that redemptive purpose in mind. There are many second comings. Jesus Christ, the incarnate love of God, continues to come into history. And just as people missed the birth of the Savior the first time, so we can miss these latter day Advents.

I heard about one recently. James Wall, Editor of *The Christian Century*, the leading journal of Christian thought and opinion, was traveling in Israel and Palestine with a small group of American Christian Church leaders two weeks ago. They were fortunate enough to have a consultation with Yassir Arafat's wife, Madame Suha, formerly a Christian who converted to Islam. At the end of what was a very cordial and hopeful exchange, a Methodist Bishop from Ohio, Judy Craig, asked if it would be appropriate if they prayed together. Madame Suha stood up, offered her hands and as Wall told it, they stood there like Methodist kids at Senior High Camp, holding hands and praying. Bishop Craig prayed simply and eloquently for peace and for the safety of all the political leaders in that critical and fragile atmosphere.

The group met with Yassir Arafat. And at the end of another pleasant conversation, his wife, Madame Suha, told him that the group had prayed for him. "Good," he said, "do it again please." And he stood and they held hands and prayed for peace between Israeli and Arab, Moslem, Jew, Christian. "Pray for me, please, every day," Yassir Arafat said. Jim Wall, who has been around and seen a lot, said it was a moment never to be forgotten.

It was an Advent moment: it was, I choose to believe, the presence of a loving God, moving men and women, divided by centuries of hatred and cruelty and racism, and violence toward peace. It was, of course, no guarantee of anything. But it was a moment when you can see, if you look carefully, the advent of God into human affairs, the coming of the Christ Child again, the light in the darkness.

It happens — and when it does all we can do is rejoice and give thanks ... and dance.

- In the middle of dealing with critical illness, a baby is born, new life.
- You're in the hellish captivity of a tired and broken relationship, and from deep within yourself you feel the impetus to forgive, to try again, and you reach out ...
- Or you're alone, in a kind of self-imposed exile, sitting in some land of deep darkness, a land of addiction or dependence, a land of resentment, anger, self-pity ... and someone reaches in and holds your hand and gently leads you into the light and in that hand you feel God's hand, and Jesus has come again.

It is the most amazing idea anybody ever had ... God is a God of infinite love and compassion and grace ... whose coming into human history in the birth of Jesus happens again and again and again ...

There's a wonderful English carol. It's very old. It captures the goodness of this news which is always, no matter how many times we have heard it, beyond our ability either to understand or explain it; news so good, all we can do is respond with everything in us, "Tomorrow shall be my Dancing Day!"

"Sing O my love, O my love,
My love, my love ...
This have I done for my true love ..."

To each of us, the ancient promise comes:

"You have turned my mourning into dancing.
You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent,
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever."